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PERCHLORATE PLUME

Board needs to get to bottom of contamination

OUR VIEW: *Water quality board needs to be aggressive and get the upper hand in expanded investigation.*

The Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board is taking a strong step in expanding its investigation into who is responsible for a plume of perchlorate contamination that has shut down 18 wells serving Rialto, Colton and Fontana. In so doing, it has spared the two main companies accused of contaminating the groundwater under Rialto from immediate recriminations.

But now, the water board must be aggressive in pursuing its investigation and locking in who the main culprits are, lest its decision to let B.F. Goodrich Corp. and Kwikset Corp. off the hook is to be seen as counterproductive.

The board in June had ordered the two companies to pay for expensive replacement water or else cleanup. But it rescinded the order last week because it feared a delay of up to two years if the companies continued to fight the order.

Water board officials believe that Goodrich contributed to the problem when it manufactured and tested rocket fuel from 1957 to 1964 near the Mid-Valley Landfill in Rialto. Kwikset is believed to be the corporate successor to West Coast Loading Corp., which made parachute and pistol flares at the same spot from the early 1950s to 1957.

But with the two companies fighting responsibility, the board has decided to try to move things along, in hopes of finding a resolution sooner rather than later.

The board ordered staff to send letters to at least 40 companies that also may share responsibility. The letters will demand that the companies help investigate the sources of the contamination, with fines if they don't cooperate.

Meanwhile, the West San Bernardino County Water District, which also has affected wells, is considering installing a perchlorate treatment system in the hopes that those responsible for the pollution will pay for it later.

That, of course, is the best-case scenario, until those responsible step up to the plate and pay their share for cleanup. Otherwise, affected cities and water districts are left to pay for replacement water, while the plume continues to spread.

Unless and until the affected parties realize their civic duty, it's up to the regional water board to keep up the pressure and narrow down those responsible for the contamination.